

Here

The old house sat at the end of French Street, almost a half mile away from its closest neighbor. It was a single story home shrouded by dark trees, a small structure that seemed to be huddling in on itself. The white siding was tinged with dark gray, and the roof was missing a few shingles. The sidewalk that lead up to the front door was cracked, and the wooden stairs looked like they would work better as firewood.

Ellen bit back her tears, clutching the box in her arms so tightly to her chest she could hardly breathe. It was a far cry from the home they had just come from; it made her chest ache to see herself go from her white picket fence dream house in Louisville to something so desolate in West Liberty. Beside her, Daniel sighed audibly, tucking his stuffed dog under his arm. “Cold, Mommy.”

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she started walking down the sidewalk. Her son followed behind her gingerly, and would only come up to the porch until she had the door unlocked and open for him. He tucked his toy under his neck as Ellen sat the box down in the foyer to turn the heat on.

“Do you want to see your room?” Holding onto the belt loop of her jeans, Daniel allowed her to lead him through the foyer into the living room, past the kitchen, and down the hallway to where the two bedrooms were. She pushed the door open to the room on the right, revealing a room lit only by the window on the far wall. The only objects inside were a twin bed frame, a dresser, and a small table. She flicked on the overhead light, and if she didn’t look too hard, she could miss the paint chipping off the walls.

“Small,” Daniel said, using the tip of his shoe to toe at the dusty brown carpet.

“There will be plenty of room for your toys.” She patted him on the head. “It’s only for a little while. We won’t live here forever.”

The furnace wafted the smell of burning dust throughout the house as Ellen unpacked Daniel’s toys and coloring books first, just so that he would be occupied while she unpacked their clothes, bathroom items, plates, cutlery, and cookware. She found herself being relieved over the fact that most of the furniture came with the house. There was no way she would have been able to carry couches and a bed in by herself. His small mattress was easily placed into the pine bed frame.

Before she brought anything else in, she cleaned and vacuumed every square inch. On craigslist, it listed that it had been a while since anyone had inhabited the house, but it still surprising. The dust had rolled into balls around the footsteps she had taken on the carpet, and her path from the front door to Daniel’s bedroom was clearly marked. The toilet bowl was stained with stagnant water, and rusty liquid spurted from the brass faucet when she turned on the sink.

It was nearly dark by the time she was finished. She had just enough daylight left to bring the rest of the boxes in from her pickup truck. By the time she had finished lugging her own mattress in, night had fallen.

She pressed the back of her hand against her stinging eyes as she finished organizing the boxes and things by room. Ten years. That’s how long she had been devoted to creating her perfect life. But when it had all come crumbling down around her, a small truckload and a sad child was all she had to show for it.

She choked down a sob when she heard Daniel's soft footsteps walk toward her. Eventually, the muffled footsteps sounded loud against the linoleum flooring of the kitchen.

"Hungry, Mommy."

"Daniel, we've talked about this. You need to use sentences, not words."

"Sorry." She gave him a sharp look. "*I'm* sorry."

Sighing, she forced a smile on her face. "What would you like to eat?"

"I would like some mac and cheese," he said, exaggerating every word. "Please."

It didn't take long to dig out a package of Kraft from one of the boxes, and a pot from another. Daniel sat at the Big Lots dining table, playing with some of his action figures as she went to work.

When she was finished, she sat the bowl in front of him and started unpacking the rest of the kitchen. After a bit of silence, she asked, "Are you excited for school tomorrow?"

"No, not really," he said, keeping his head low and not turning away from his dinner.

"I know it's a new place, but you'll make friends quickly. I'm sure of it."

"Yeah." He was eating his food methodically, and had propped his head against his hand as he stared down into it.

She tried a few more times to drag some conversation out of him, but Daniel was not having it. Eventually, he finished eating, grabbed his toys, and trudged back to his room.

With a heavy sigh, Ellen dumped the rest of the mac and cheese from the pot into his discarded bowl and sat down heavily on the couch. They didn't have any cable connected to the house yet, so the TV remained black as she stared at her reflection in it.

She wondered if this was the lowest she's ever been – divorced, alone, her child not speaking to her, and eating a child's dinner in dead silence. Vaguely, she pondered the half empty wine bottle sitting packed in one of the boxes in the kitchen, but she had to take Daniel to school tomorrow. The last thing she needed was for a hangover be his teacher's first impression of her.

Ellen's sister, Alicia, was waiting outside of her house after she got finished dropping off Daniel and grabbing herself a coffee from McDonalds – one of the two fast food restaurants in town. Ellen desperately needed a grocery trip, but the child support check wasn't coming until next week, so it would be ramen and canned soup for the next three days.

Alicia had a big smile on her face, her curls bobbing as she waved. It had been over a year since she had seen her sister, and Ellen felt a small smile tug at her face. Her brown hair had become blonde in their time apart, and her hips were a little wider. But that seemed to be the only thing that had changed.

“Ellen!” Alicia cried as she pulled Ellen forcibly from the truck. “I missed you. I'm so happy you're here!”

“I've missed you, too.” She grabbed her purse and coffee.

Alicia stepped back and observed the house. “A real looker, ain't it?”

Ellen sighed, feeling dejected once more about the state of her home. “It’s a roof. That’s all that matters.”

“I wasn’t sure I heard you right when you told me the address. No one has lived here for years.”

“So I’ve heard.” Ellen started walking forward, and Alicia followed hesitantly behind.

When they entered the house, Alicia started speaking again. “You know the story behind it, don’t you?”

Ellen winced. *There’s a story?*

At her silence, Alicia said, “The owner is Johnny Cantrell, right?” Ellen nodded; that was the person she was renting the house from. “Well, this was his mamaw’s house. She died in her sleep here one night about five years ago.”

Ellen almost dropped her coffee on the floor. Someone *died* in this house? And they left the furniture in it?

“Where did she die?”

“In the bed, I reckon.” Alicia glanced at her when Ellen audibly sighed in relief. “What?”

“I was thinking I was going to have to buy a new couch,” Ellen said. “Thankfully, they didn’t leave the mattress with the house.”

Alicia smiled sheepishly. “She was there for several days before they found her. Ain’t no way they kept the mattress.” Ellen grimaced, leading them to the living room. “Look, hon, there’s no such thing as ghosts. That lady went to Heaven when she died. No need to worry.”

“I know.” Still, Ellen took a deep breath to calm herself.

They each sat at opposite ends of the old floral couch, Ellen drinking the last of her coffee and Alicia observing her in silence for a few moments. “What is it?”

“You look different,” Alicia said. “Skinnier than before. More tired.”

“Not surprising. I did just get divorced.”

Alicia looked away at her bitter tone. “Yeah, sorry. Just worried about you.” Another tense silence. “How’s Daniel?”

“His misses his Dad.” Ellen sat the empty cup on the coffee table. “He hardly speaks to me.”

“He blame you?”

“No, I don’t think so. He knows what Sam did.” Ellen brushed back her long brown hair. “I don’t think he understands why we have to leave. And I’m not really sure I could even explain it to him. He’s too upset.”

“Can’t believe that idiot took the house,” Alicia said with a scoff. “Who leaves his unemployed wife without a house? Disgusting man.”

“I didn’t want to live there. Not when he had screwed her in every room when I was gone.” Alicia gave a sympathetic smile. “I shouldn’t have left school to marry him. That was stupid.”

“You were in love. The only thing stupid about that was trusting him.”

“It won’t be a mistake I make again. I start at Morehead in January.”

That was another one of the reasons she had decided to move to West Liberty, aside from cheap rent. Her sister would be here to help her take care of Daniel while she worked to get her degree, and hopefully get a job that could buy them a better house. And eventually, send Daniel to school when the time was right.

Alicia clapped excitedly. “You’ll be the best accountant ever! You were always so good at numbers. You’ll give Daniel everything he deserves.”

Ellen couldn’t help but grin. “I hope you’re right.” But after Alicia left a few hours later, her doubts began to creep back in.

The fan made a soft buzzing noise as it circulated against the ceiling. Ellen had been watching it for hours, but sleep didn’t come. Daniel had been a bit brighter today when she picked him up from school, and talked about some kids he met before falling into silence again around dinner time. She wasn’t sure what she could do to help him.

She was so tired. It took a lot of energy to be positive for him. He didn’t need to know she lied awake at night, thinking about what she could have done to keep Sam with her, or how she could have stayed in school and they wouldn’t be in this situation right now. Sometimes, she wished she had never met Sam, but then she wouldn’t have Daniel, and that was even more painful.

Her heart leaped when a thud resounded in the hallway outside. She took a deep breath.
The furnace in this house is old. That must have been it.

But then it happened again. It wasn't really like something slamming inside the walls, but rather something being dropped on the hardwood floor. Her mind raced. *Maybe the plumbing under the floorboards? It probably hasn't been replaced in decades.*

There was one board in the hallway that creaked when you stepped on it. When she heard that familiar noise, she nearly went into a panic.

Her mind went to Daniel, sleeping soundly in the room across the hall. She was on her feet, straining to hear the sound of more steps in the hallway over the pounding of her own heart. They were slow and paced, walking carefully along the hardwood towards her door. She grabbed the hard backed bible from the night stand, wondering how someone had broken a window or the deadbolt without her hearing it. She was absolutely positive that she had locked it after dinner.

But it didn't really matter how it had happened. All that mattered now was protecting Daniel.

She stepped in front of the door, and when the footsteps stopped on the other side, she threw it open. With a shriek, she swung blindly.

The book swiped through the air. There was nothing.

Ellen ran to Daniel's room and opened the door, trying not to wake him in her panic. He was still fast asleep in his bed, unaware of the footsteps in the hall.

She double checked – triple checked – the house for intruders. Opened every closet and cabinet and even peered behind the shower curtain. There was no one else in the house, and no sign of a forced entry.

Falling back into her bed in a cold sweat, she refused to let her mind consider the possibility of ghosts. But even still, she left her lamp on and held the Bible to her chest as she struggled with sleep the rest of the night.

Alicia invited them over for dinner the next night. Invited was a polite term – her sister wouldn't take no for an answer. Ellen was pretty sure she had seen the state of her pantry during her last visit and had decided to feed them something that wasn't out of a can. It was only one more day until the child support check.

It was a good dinner – homemade fried chicken, buttery mashed potatoes, sweet green peas, and buttermilk biscuits. It made Ellen almost want to improve her own skills. Almost.

Her sister did a good job of keeping everyone talking. It was her specialty. Her husband, Harold, was a kind man. But he was very quiet. She still wasn't sure how the two had ended up together, but thirteen years and three kids later, they still seemed just as happy as they did when they got married.

The two of them had met in high school, something Ellen had looked down on for several years. Who would want to be stuck here their whole life? She had cut most of her ties to West Liberty by the time she enrolled at UK. She dreamed of meeting a young and handsome professional from a big city, where they would buy a big house and have a bunch of kids.

Look where that got me, she thought bitterly.

“So, Daniel,” Alicia said. “How are you liking your new school?”

“It’s great! Ms. Hamilton says were going to learn cursive next week!” His smile was wide.

“Oh, that’s exciting! You making any friends?”

“Yeah, Bradley sits next to me in class. He wants me to join the football team, but I won’t be able to until next year. And there’s Tyler, we race during recess.”

“Looks like you’re settling in!” Alicia glanced at Ellen, who was poking her mashed potatoes absently with her fork. “Well, you know if you ever need someone at school, both Abby and Michael are there.”

“Not for long!” Abby said excitedly. “I go to middle school next year!”

“Oh goodness, don’t remind me.” Alicia clutched her chest as though she would faint at the thought.

When dinner was finished, they moved to the living room. Harold was leaning back in his recliner, watching a football game on TV. Michael was showing Daniel some of his toy racecars, while Abby was playing on Alicia’s iPad. The youngest, Taylor, sat in front of her mother’s feet as she chewed on one of her stuffed animals.

“They finally get cable for your house today?” Alicia asked. Ellen nodded. “It’s about time. That house is too quiet.”

Ellen winced. “Sometimes.”

“You heard from Sam?” She was quiet enough so Daniel wouldn’t hear.

“No, not yet.”

“Some father. Doesn’t even call to see how their kid’s first week is going.” Alicia crossed her arms and huffed.

“I didn’t even realize he had made friends,” Ellen said suddenly. Her sister stared at her. “He didn’t tell me.”

“He knows you’re going through a hard time. I’m sure he’s just trying to give you space.”

“Maybe.”

Daniel was laughing and smiling when Ellen told him it’s time to go. He waved goodbye to his cousins and hugged Alicia and Harold. His smile was nowhere to be seen by the time they climbed in the pickup truck, however.

“I’m sorry you missed the football signup,” Ellen said after a few minutes of silence.

“It’s okay.”

“Maybe you could join the basketball team. That’s coming up.”

“Yeah.”

They arrived home after a short while. Ellen unlocked the door and Daniel darted passed her into the house.

“Where are you going?”

“Bed.”

“Daniel, use your *sentences*.”

He was quiet for a few moments. “I’m going to bed.”

Ellen sighed. “Go brush your teeth first.”

She didn't point out the fact that he was going to bed a half hour earlier than normal. Instead, she helped him get ready and tucked him in. All she got was a soft goodnight before heading back out into the living room.

Ellen tried not to cry as she watched some ridiculous late night television show. Why couldn't she get through to him? Why was he so different around her than around everyone else? Maybe he did blame her for the divorce. He would hardly speak to her when they told him, though he acted almost normal around his father. *She* was the one who had filed, while Sam insisted they try to reconcile. *She* was the reason they were in West Liberty now.

Ellen grabbed the wine from the kitchen and took a drink straight from the bottle. What was she supposed to do? Stay with him? She couldn't live with herself if she did that. But maybe Daniel would be happier with his father.

Her grip on the glass tightened. *There's no way I'm letting him live with that pig.*

She took another swig from the bottle as forced her eyes to focus on the TV. Sam never liked it when she drank. He always said it set a bad example for Daniel. *Yeah, well, so does having an affair!*

Two more chugs and she was feeling dizzy. It was his fault that there were in this situation. Not hers. Sam was the reason that Daniel was so sad. That her son wouldn't speak to her.

She downed the rest of the bottle and laid down flat on the couch. It slipped from her hand and landed with a muffled sound against the carpet. Tears streamed from her eyes as the

room spun. She covered her face with her hands as the comedian on the TV show made the audience howl with laughter.

Why me?

She laid there for a while, but snapped to attention when the sound of the TV faded into white noise. She looked up to see the screen covered in static, the picture faint behind the haze.

Ellen couldn't even be mad. In fact, she burst out laughing. *Of course* the TV breaks. *Of course* this would happen in the middle of her break down. She stood up, nearly falling back down in the process. With a careful waddle, she made her way over to it.

She tried smacking it, and obvious solution in her drunken state. When nothing changed, she started fiddling with the wires in the back.

For several minutes, she did this. Maybe the wires were bad. But the TV was the newest thing in this house, so that couldn't be it. Maybe the cable people set it up wrong when they came in earlier. She made a mental note that she would definitely forget to call them tomorrow.

A muffled sound came from the TV, breaking the constant white noise. She stepped back, looking at it again. After a few seconds, she heard what sounded like a whisper coming from the speakers.

Ellen was frozen. She stood stark still in the middle of the living room, watching the static across the screen like she would see the future in them. Her heart was pounding, thoughts going to all of those horror movies she watched in college.

There's no such thing as ghosts. Spirits can't talk through electronics.

That's when she heard it. The whisper repeated for the third time, loud and clear.

PAIN.

Ellen ran from the room, her feet barely touching the floor as she ran to the end of the hallway. She barged into Daniel's room, where he was sleeping softly in his bed. She closed the door as quietly as she could, straining to hear anything going on outside the room over her heart beating in her ears.

Nothing.

She crawled into the twin bed with Daniel, shaking violently. She didn't sleep a wink that night.

Both of them were unusually quiet today. Daniel didn't say anything when she dropped him off at school, and she suspected it was because he woke up to find her in the bed with him. She was too exhausted to even try to cheer him up today. Still too nervous to go back to the house, she pulled into Old Mill Park, the only park within West Liberty city limits. She parked in the far corner of the parking lot, laid down across the bench seat, and slept for several hours.

When she woke up, she spent most of her drive to Dairy Queen, the other fast food restaurant in West Liberty, trying to think of reasons why she heard a voice speak through the TV last night. She was drunk. It was bad wiring. It had connected to a channel while she was trying to fix it. But none of it did anything to make her feel better.

She drove home briefly after eating to grab the check from the mail. Then she went to the bank to get it cashed, and then spent the remainder of the time that Daniel was in school getting groceries.

He was still as quiet as he was this morning when she picked him up.

“I went to the store today,” Ellen said, trying to smile. “I got those snack cakes you like.”

“Thanks.”

At least it was something. When they arrived home, Daniel went off to his room and Ellen unloaded the truck and started putting groceries away. She stashed the rest of the cash somewhere safe until she opened an account at the bank.

She flitted nervously around the house, cleaning things that were already clean and straightening things that were already straight. She refused to turn the TV on.

After a while, she found herself struggling to read the Bible she had brought from the bedroom. Alicia said reading it would give her comfort, but she didn't believe that even when she was still going to church. But still, anything would help.

Then, her phone rang.

Setting the book down on the coffee table, she stood up and picked her phone up off the dining table. Her heart stopped.

Sam.

It took her several seconds to work up the nerve to answer. “Hello?”

“Hi, Ellen.”

She swallowed heavily. They hadn't talked since she moved out.

“How are you?” Sam said.

“Fine.” She gritted her teeth. She didn't really care how he was.

Sam sighed. He must have figured this would be awkward. “Did you get the check today?”

Ellen forced her mouth to quit locking up. “Yeah... yeah I did. Thanks.”

“Sure.” Another beat of silence. “How’s Daniel?”

“Daniel’s doing fine.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“He’s busy.”

Sam was quiet again, clearly getting frustrated with her. “Ellen, don’t be this way.”

“Don’t be this way? You’re telling *me* not be this way, after everything *you’ve* done?”

She cut Sam off before he could retort. “You don’t call to see if we’ve moved in okay. You don’t call him on his first day of school. It’s been almost a week now and we haven’t heard from you once!”

“I was just giving you space. Clearly you still need some.”

“Or you’ve been too busy with *her*.” Ellen’s voice was venomous. “The sex is too good to remember that you have a son.”

“Ellen, that is so unfair.” She scoffed, and he sighed. “Look, I didn’t call to argue with you. I want to talk to him. I want to see him.”

The thought made Ellen almost want to vomit. Him? Coming here? To see them living in this shack in the woods? That could not happen. Her pride could only take so much of a beating.

“Well, maybe you should have about that before you had an affair.”

“Damn it, Ellen!”

She winced.

“You can’t keep my son from me as punishment!”

“And you can’t expect things to be normal!” she shouted back. “You can’t hurt us like that and get away with it! It’s not punishment. I’m making sure he doesn’t turn out to be someone like you.”

“You have to let me see him. The court says so.”

“You get every other weekend and half of each holiday.” She was seething. “And it is not a weekend or a holiday.”

“Christ, Ellen. Why do you have to be so horrible? No wonder Daniel won’t speak around you.”

That hurt. That *really* hurt.

“Go to Hell, Sam!” With that, she hung up the phone.

She let out a frustrated scream, and when she was finished, she heard a hiccupping sob coming from behind her. She whirled around, just in time to see Daniel running off.

“Daniel, wait!” She chased after him, but she wasn’t quick enough to get to the door. He slammed it shut behind him, locking it. “Daniel, open the door!” All she could hear from the other room was his cries.

She banged on it for what felt like hours, screaming at him to open the door. Finally, she ended up banging her head on the wood.

“Goddammit!” she shouted to no one in particular.

Why was this happening to her? What had she done to deserve this? Why had Sam cheated on her with another woman? She put her back against the door. All her life, she had tried so hard. She had so many dreams, but for some reason, the world didn’t want her to have them. It wanted to beat her down, and keep her there.

Maybe she deserved this, in some way. Maybe she was too snobby in high school and college, and this was karma’s way of knocking her down a few pegs. Maybe she really was a bad mother, and she didn’t deserve to care for a child as wonderful as Daniel.

The walls shook. To her right, a picture fell off the wall and the glass shattered into tiny shards all over the floor. The panels began to shutter and creak, and it resounded throughout the house. It felt like the walls were attempting to close in on her. In a blind hysteria, she got up and ran from the living room, only to find the walls vibrating in here as well.

“Stop!” she screeched, kneeling down in the floor and pressing her head in between her arms. “Please, God, stop it!”

Her sobs came out painfully, racking her entire body with them. She fell forward and pressed her forehead into the carpet. “Leave me alone!”

She didn’t know how long she laid there, the walls quaking and the air being sucked out of the room. She nearly choked on her own words, feeling like she was getting ready to die.

“Please, stop. I’m trying so hard. So, so hard. I’m trying to be good enough.”

But she wasn’t. She wasn’t good enough. She hadn’t been good enough for Sam. She wasn’t good enough for Daniel. He didn’t deserve a mother like her, who fed him mac and

cheese from the box and drank half a bottle of wine in one sitting. A mother who had to wait for a child support check every two weeks just to feed him, much less buy him the things we wants and needs.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” Her voice came out as a whisper. “I’m so, so sorry.”

A weight pressed against her back, but she was too defeated to fight against whatever ghost was plaguing her.

To her surprise, it was Daniel. “Stop crying, Mommy,” he said, through his sobs. “Please stop crying.”

She turned her head to see him leaning over her shoulder. “Please feel better. I want my mommy back.”

Fresh tears came from her eyes, but she sat up and pulled him against her chest anyway. “Mommy is right here.”

He put his palm against her drumming heart. “I love you, Mommy. I’m scared.”

With a pang, she had realized how selfish she was being. Daniel had been forced to move out of the only house he had known. He missed his father. He missed having his parents together. He had to move to a new town, too.

No wonder he had been so quiet. She might have been there with him physically, but emotionally, she hadn’t been with him at all.

“I love you, baby,” she said, forcing past the lump in her throat. “Don’t be scared. I’m right here. I’ll always be right here.”

“Will I ever see Daddy again?”

“Yes, baby. Daddy will always be there, too. No matter what happens between him and Mommy.” She pressed her face into his hair. “You never have to be scared. Everything is going to be okay.”

Eventually, it would be. She didn’t know how long it would take. Days, weeks, years...it might not ever feel normal again. But it would be okay again. As long as she had Daniel, it would always be enough. And maybe she would be enough for him, too.

They remained on the floor for a while, until their eyes were dry and their breath in rhythm once again. The shaking had stopped.

Those walls never bothered her again.